

The Mysteries of the Nazi Ghost Train

St. Gilles, the main prison in Brussels, kept more than 1,000 prisoners of war. The German commander of Belgium, SS Gen. Richard Jungclaus, ordered the prisoners be sent to Germany. On Sept. 1, 1944, the Gestapo crammed a line of 20 cattle cars, later dubbed the Nazi Ghost Train, with hundreds of Belgian prisoners of war, captured Allied airmen, and other enemies of the Nazi cause. The train was bound for camps in Germany. However, thanks to the remarkable efforts of an underground organisation known as the Comet Line, the train never reached German soil. In fact, the train never got far beyond the Brussels rail station.



Brussels was the site of the Nazi Ghost Train event.
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Background

Until mid-1944, Germany controlled western Europe. An underground Belgian resistance group, the Comet Line, was formed to assist allied airmen and soldiers. Increased German control made safe train crossings difficult for the Comet Line and others in the Belgian resistance. Paris, the Comet Line's headquarters, was discovered by the Germans and resistance members were captured. But, the resistance stayed one

step ahead of the Gestapo in a plan that would save hundreds of lives.

A Sabotaged Journey

At first, engine trouble and unorganised rail employees caused the train not to move from the station. When the assistant stationmaster arrived at the station that morning, he discovered what was happening and ordered that the train be stopped. A rail worker conveyed a message to the captured airmen packed into one of the cattle cars that they would not be heading to Germany, but they would be freed. Switches were disconnected. A train engineer, who was working for the resistance, threw himself off the train. The oil pump was ripped out. The water supply was sabotaged. Train tracks were destroyed by explosives. Railway workers did everything in their power to ensure that the train did not make it to Germany. The train did not get far.

Tragedy turns to Triumph

The train was diverted to another town overnight after the Germans were convinced by railworkers that the engine needed more water. As the train sat still in Muizen for two days, diplomats from neutral countries became involved and pleaded with the SS general to return the train to Brussels. He refused. After the neutral nations threatened that German hospital trains carrying wounded German soldiers would be destroyed, Jungclaus finally gave in and sent the train to Brussels. The train returned to Brussels Grande Ile Station to find out many hours later that Brussels had been liberated by the British. The train's doors were cautiously forced open, releasing civilian prisoners first, following the airmen, who disappeared into the city, free from the Germans.

Aftermath

Because of the courageous and risky acts of Belgian resistance workers and the Comet Line, the train never arrived at the German camps. Many lives were saved, and almost 300 of those saved found safety in Spain with the help of the Belgium and French resistance. Belgium commemorates this historical event. The airmen, who will always be bound by this significant event, found companionship and some remained friends throughout their lives. This event of World War II is only one of many where thousands of lives were saved by courageous people.

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References

WWII Netherlands Escape Lines: Prisoners of the Phantom Train ...; Bruce Bolinger

Vimeo: Nazi Ghost Train
